

Children & Food: Improving School Food

So, you'd like to improve the food in the school cafeteria

Is the food environment in your child's school not what you'd like it to be? Here's some help! This checklist will help you get started on the journey of school food reform. Along the way, you will discover that advocating for better food can be rewarding on many levels.

See for yourself what's going on at lunch.

- Set up a lunch date and dine in the cafeteria. This is the best way to experience what's served, what the students are/are not eating and what the food environment is like. You might want to photo document your discoveries.

Look beyond the lunchroom.

- Are there candy fundraisers at your school?
- Are there soda and sports drinks in vending machines?
- Does your school have a snack shack or snack truck?

Learn the history.

- What committees are already in place? Decide if you need to start a new group or can you join forces with an existing one.
- Your PTA/ PTO handbook has the contact numbers of committee leaders. Call some of them and you'll quickly learn the inside scoop!
- Find out what groups or committees have done in the past in your school district. Were they successful? What were their challenges?

Check out the wellness policy.

- Is there one? Is it regularly updated? Is the language vague or does it include specifics about food in the cafeteria, food rewards in the classroom, fundraisers and events?
- Does your school have an active wellness committee? If so, have a long chat with those committee members and ask lots of questions.

Cultivate a group of like-minded parents.

- Keep in mind that parents who care about environmental issues or allergies might be on the same page as you when it comes to food.

Include children.

- Talk to your children and their friends: What is their perspective on the food situation?
- Asking food questions is a great icebreaker for children. They love to tell you all about their favorite foods and they certainly have an opinion about lunch!

Find some allies within the system.

- You might find that a science teacher, the school nurse, or the librarian has a green thumb or cares about real food.

Visit **Mrs. Q**

This teacher in the Midwest started eating and photographing school lunch. Visit Mrs. Q's blog to see a year's worth of school lunch photos.

<http://bit.ly/lunchphotos>

Yale Rudd Center

This center for food policy has a tool to help you evaluate your wellness policy:

<http://bit.ly/RuddCtr>



Take the temperature.

- In order to make meaningful changes in school food, you need to find out where you are starting from when it comes to food philosophy.
- Creating a simple food survey for both parents and students will help you see what people are thinking about the school food environment, and help raise awareness.
- Online tools like Survey Monkey and Zoomerang are easy to set up and free of charge in most cases.

Come up with a plan.

- What do you want to change and why? Work with your group to make a top ten list of what you feel needs to be changed, then prioritize and make a timeline.
- Think big, but start small. Have both a short and long range plan.

Identify key decision makers.

- Once you've come up with a plan and some specific numbers, it is time to figure out who the key decision makers are.
- Get some feedback and support from PTA/ PTO committees to help you go about this.

Is lunch at your school outsourced to a corporation?

- Roughly 23-30% of schools use food service management corporations like Sodhexo, Aramark and Compass group to handle the food.
- To make significant changes in lunchroom food in this case, you'll need to work those changes into the contract specs when it goes out to bid. While this may seem daunting, it can be done, it just takes the right timing along with the steps above.

A better food environment can manifest in many forms.

- Regular parent volunteers in the lunch room who help encourage students to make healthier choices
- A salad bar (saladbars2schools.org)
- Zero waste lunches and composting projects
- A farm to school program that celebrates local produce (www.farmtoschool.org)
- A wellness policy that eliminates food rewards
- Visits from local chefs
- Visits from local farmers
- An iron chef cooking competition using garden veggies or another local food
- A school garden (see Slow Food USA's tip sheet on starting a school garden)

Re-Thinking School Lunch

A group of children in New Orleans created a school wide project. They took photos, conducted surveys and made short and long term recommendations.

See their report here:
www.therethinkers.com.

Resources

National Farm to School Network

www.farmtoschool.org

Chef Ann Cooper's Lunch Lessons

www.chefann.com

